

# While there are differences, there are also important similarities between the profiles of UKIP and BNP's respective support bases

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*While UKIP has seen a rise in support, another party on the right, the BNP, have witnessed a dramatic decline. **Heinz Brandenburg** and **Anders Widfeldt** studied the similarities and differences between the UKIP and BNP support bases, finding that BNP fits the electoral profile of a radical right party better than UKIP in some ways; for instance, support for BNP is associated with little regard for the British democracy while UKIP supporter exhibit a high regard. But in other ways both parties fit the typical profile of radical right support; their supporters are predominantly male, young, lower class and less educated.*



The growth of anti-establishment parties has been given much media as well as scholarly attention across Europe. In Britain, the UK Independence Party is constantly the third biggest party, ahead of the Liberal Democrats, in voting intentions to the EU as well as Westminster parliaments. Meanwhile support for the British National Party has declined drastically in recent years. It should be remembered that UKIP has been comfortably bigger than BNP in every UK-wide election since 1999, but these two parties' respective changes in fortune are still remarkable. After several years of slow but steady growth, culminating with the 2009 EU election, the BNP decline has been unequivocal.



Despite obvious differences, not least in origin, UKIP and BNP have many things in common. Besides the profound dislike of the EU, both parties want to reduce immigration, they advocate more law and order and they are very critical of the political establishment. At least to some extent, therefore, they compete for the same votes even though they both are at pains to mark distance to each other. In a recent research paper we studied similarities and differences between the UKIP and BNP support bases. Our data are from the 2010 British Election Study, which means that we were not able to directly analyse the reasons for the UKIP growth and BNP decline, but it provides circumstantial evidence. To what extent is the growth of UKIP the result of a successful attempt to compete for the mainstream vote, and to what extent does it draw on former BNP supporters, who find UKIP more legitimate?

There is no doubt that the legitimacy of UKIP and BNP differs. In our study we found that BNP is seen by about 70% of the British electorate as not electable. UKIP, meanwhile, are on average less liked than the three main parties, but not by much. Still, our data indicate that BNP and UKIP form their own little corner in the British party system. Aside from their own voters, nobody has a more positive view of the BNP than UKIP voters, and nobody has a more positive view of UKIP than BNP voters (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Feelings towards parties, by party vote in 2010**

	Average feeling thermometer scores (standard deviation)				
<i>Party voted for</i>	BNP	UKIP	Conservative	Labour	LibDem
<i>BNP</i> (n=130)	<b>7.30</b> (2.48)	<b>5.79</b> (2.61)	<b>3.65</b> (2.74)	<b>2.38</b> (2.70)	<b>3.43</b> (2.36)
<i>UKIP</i> (n=509)	<b>3.69</b> (2.98)	<b>7.27</b> (2.25)	<b>4.29</b> (2.38)	<b>1.99</b> (2.25)	<b>3.96</b> (2.20)
<i>Conservative</i> (n=4,098)	<b>2.15</b> (2.67)	<b>4.33</b> (2.67)	<b>7.33</b> (1.84)	<b>1.70</b> (1.97)	<b>4.42</b> (2.03)
<i>Labour</i> (n=3,146)	<b>1.21</b> (2.22)	<b>2.44</b> (2.36)	<b>2.23</b> (2.15)	<b>7.09</b> (2.06)	<b>4.90</b> (2.03)
<i>LibDem</i> (n=3,383)	<b>1.14</b> (2.10)	<b>2.56</b> (2.49)	<b>3.47</b> (2.38)	<b>4.31</b> (2.43)	<b>6.68</b> (2.01)

*Note: Feeling thermometer scores are measured on an 11-point scale, from 0=strongly dislike to 10=strongly like.*  
*Source: British Election Study Campaign Internet Panel Survey 2010*

It is often disputed what kind of party UKIP is. In the international literature it tends not to be treated as a member of the extreme/radical/populist/far right party family. Still, in the EU parliament, UKIP is currently a member of the EFD (Europe for Freedom and Democracy) group. This group also consists of other parties which frequently are classified as populist (extreme/radical/far) right, such as the Danish People's Party, the True Finns and Lega Nord. Thus, the status of UKIP in a comparative context is ambiguous. This is not the case for BNP. It is currently unattached in the European parliament, but it participated in plans to form a more unequivocally extreme right party group, together with parties such as the French Front National, Belgian/Flemish Vlaams Belang and Bulgarian Ataka. The plans did not materialise, as the putative parties did not have the required combined strength. More recently, BNP leader Nick Griffin has participated in press conferences together with the Greek Golden Dawn party.

In our study, we found that BNP fits the electoral profile of a radical right party better than UKIP. In particular, the BNP support is disproportionately drawn from disaffected voters who score low on social capital. Support for BNP is associated with little regard for the British as well as EU democracy, and low levels of trust in other people. The UKIP profile is different in these respects. Support for UKIP is, unsurprisingly, associated with a negative view of the EU, but also with a positive evaluation of the British democracy. UKIP supporters, furthermore, show no signs of social alienation.

In several respects, however, both parties fit the typical profile of radical right support. UKIP and BNP supporters are predominantly male, young, lower class and less educated. In terms of opinions, they are anti-immigration and anti-EU. Support for both parties is also associated with a right-leaning economic outlook. This is only what can be expected for UKIP, whose economic policies have clear neo-liberal elements. However, the economic policies of BNP have a more centrist – at times even centre-left – profile, which makes our finding somewhat more surprising.

Thus, while there are differences, there are also important similarities between the profiles of the parties' respective support bases. Indeed, British voters seem to view both parties as part of the same party family. Attitudes towards UKIP are strongly related to attitudes towards the BNP. In fact, no other pair of British parties comes even close to UKIP and BNP in terms of how strongly attitudes to one party are associated with attitudes to the other. This suggests that the electoral surge of UKIP and demise of BNP in recent years may to some extent have to do with ex-BNP supporters having switched sides and taken to UKIP as a viable second choice.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## About the Authors

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